

## Day 11: Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> June 2012 The Milford Experience

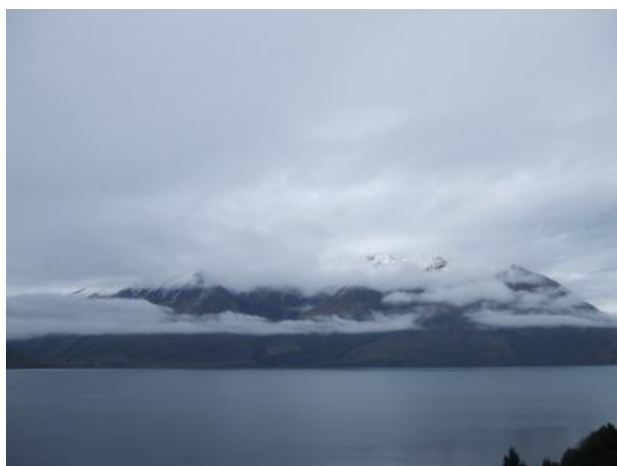
For some reason the mobile phone was 1 hour ahead of my watch so I wasn't sure what the correct time was, can't be late as the bus for Milford Sound was to leave at 8:15am. I climbed down from the bunk and got my Nano MP3 player and listened to the local radio from Invercargill to find out the actual time. Hour early is better than 1 hour late so when Robyn's alarm went off at 7am we were both up into the activities of getting breakfast read.

We were in the office before the bus which was good and finally Malcolm our dirveologist from 'Go Milford' with his small bus arrived and soon we were on the road to Milford Sound. He was a humorous fellow, getting everyone to tell the others where they came from and cracking some funny about each location but most of all his knowledge of historical facts and points of interest along the way certainly added to the experience.

Every now and again he would crack odd joke, some would laugh, some stayed silent but some were funny, odd this is though I can't remember any except one.

Have you seen the square trees dotted around the country side in New Zealand? No some replied, well here's one coming up now on the left, the lavatory. Their square trees - toilets are long drops, painted green and are hardly visible amongst the trees and scrub.

They are well maintained, clean, don't pong and some even have hand wash and running water to wash the hands.



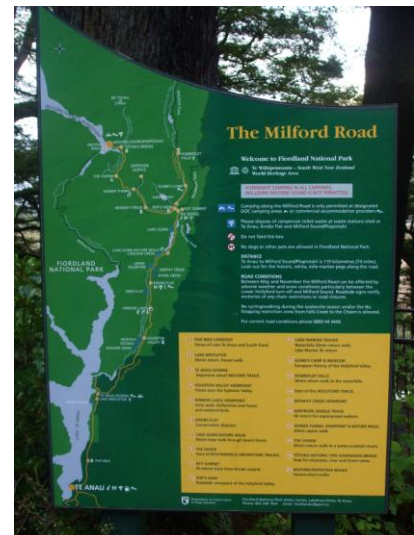
The journey along the shores of Lake Te Anau with the snow capped mountains was magnificent, especially as we set out in the dark but as went along the road the sun started to rise spreading its golden rays across the lake, country side and mountains.

Many years ago the government bought up many of the farms along this road and offered to young people who had the finance and desire to go farming sheep, cattle and deer.

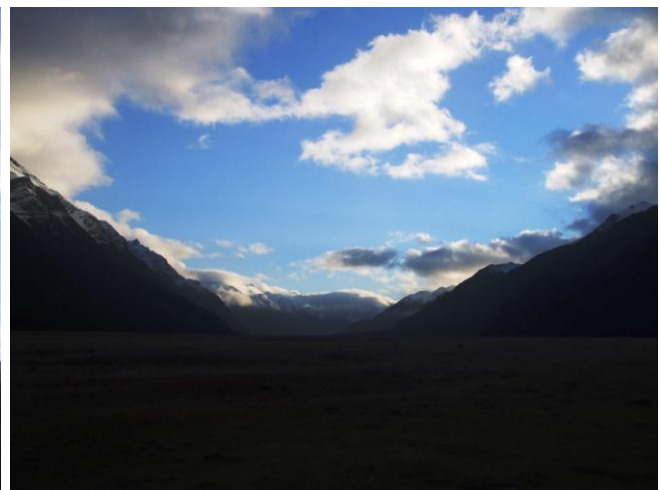
There were a couple of private farms and Malcolm told us about the early days when this area was not a national park or world heritage area and he worked with others droving sheep and cattle in and out of the mountains on hoarse back, sounded a great life but then he told us that it wasn't perfect all the time.

The Milford Road has quite a history right from the early days when the men who built the Milford Road and the Homer Tunnel in the 1930s were, for the most part, victims of the Depression and directed to the job by the government. For the men of the road, and those women who followed their men into this wilderness, life was harsh but the road and tunnel had to go through.

The weather could be vicious, the terrain ferocious, high in altitude, steep and rugged, beset by floods and deadly avalanches. Workers were brought face to face with the avalanche hazard. Men were killed; bridge structures, road works and tunnel portals destroyed.

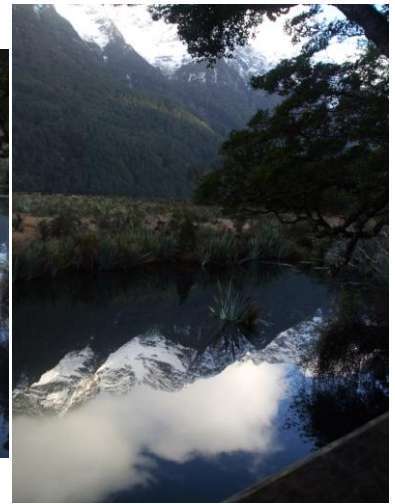


The road, which was completed in 1952, consequently was closed during winter months until the late 1970s when tourist and fishing interests successfully lobbied for it to remain open year round. After a massive avalanche killed a road maintenance supervisor in 1983, a programme was established to monitor, assess and control the avalanche hazard on the Milford Road. The internationally recognised avalanche control programme used today enables the road to remain open with optimum safety to all road users.



The annual rainfall varies so much between Te Anau and Milford and it can be seen by the grass, the trees and vegetation. The lake is fed by Eglinton River known for its brown and rainbow trout but at the moment it is outside the fishing season. As we got further up the road the river petered out to small stream fed by the run offs of melting snow from the surrounding mountains.

The bus stopped at a number of key points along the road for photos like Mirror Lake and a toilet break at Knob Flat that had a wealth of information inside about the region. Once again it was pointed out how much of a pest the Australian possum has become as well as the rabbits and stoat, all introduced species that can be trapped, shot and poisoned. In Australia we should be farming the possum for skins and hair that is mixed with merino to make warm light garments.



With the snow capped Wick Mountains on the left and Darran Mountains of the right (driving in to Milford) highlighted by the sun on this perfect clear blue sky morning was breath taking and one could take so many photos but fortunately for us were inside the bus and it would be a waste through the darkened windows.

The 1.4Km Homer Tunnel at 945m above sea level is a real masterpiece of human endeavour during the depression years when the government made unemployed men work with pick, shovel and dynamite. The tunnel was finished in 1953 and at the southern entrance you can see the concrete base and steel reinforcing poking out of the ground all that is left after an avalanche blew that part of exposed tunnel away with its 400kmph air blast.



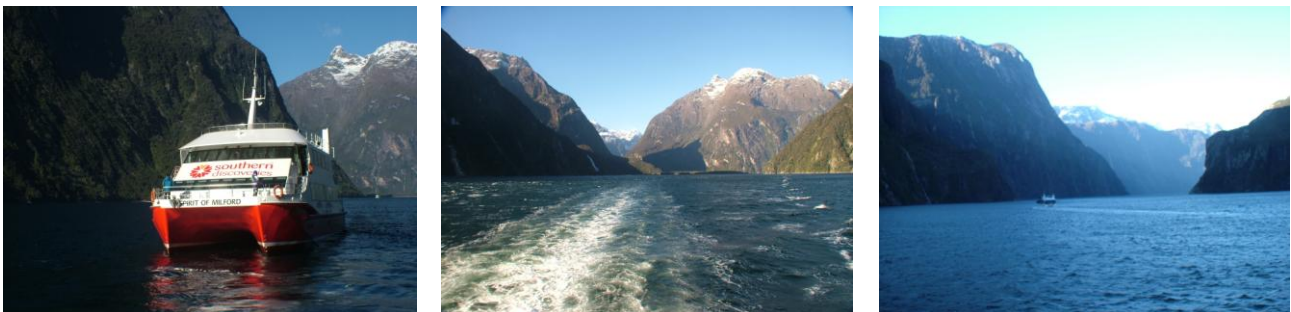
There are a number of points signifying where avalanches are possible during the winter. We heard the story about one of the road overseers who was standing behind a D9 bulldozer during an avalanche but the wind blast was so strong it ripped apart the trees and turned over the bulldozer killing him. There is a special viewing platform at his favourite place and when you see the view you understand why.

As you come out of the Homer Tunnel the road twists and turns as it drops down to the valley floor with some near 360 degree bends having a reduced speed to 24Kmph. Grit is constantly poured on the bitumen road and swept by department vehicles, certainly no place to take a motorhome and between May and November all vehicles must carry snow chains. There are special parking bays with boom gates where people must stop and fit snow chains when the weather goes nasty.



The view from the glass top of the bus through the pass was spectacular and at different places there are these huge boulders perched on the top of ridges, wouldn't like to be driving anywhere near them if the started sliding down the cliff.

Driving down into Milford the view of Mt Tuko the regions highest mountain is breath taking but I am sure many of us were concentrating on the narrow twisty road, lucky today there was no snow and black ice. We arrived at Milford with 10 minutes to spare before our Southern Discoveries cruise boat headed out. We were given tickets to board the boat, buffet lunch (starting immediately we boarded the boat) and the discovery platform on our way back.

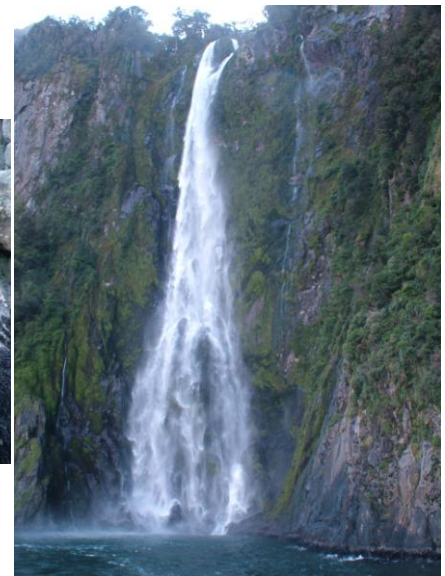


As we cruised through the sound, formed by melting glaciers millions of years ago we went up on the top deck (after we finished our lunch) and although the sun was out, the icy conditions meant we had our beanies, gloves and jackets on to keep us warm. At different time we could see the small aircraft taking off and landing on the airstrip next to the boat harbour and I guess the windy conditions through the sound.

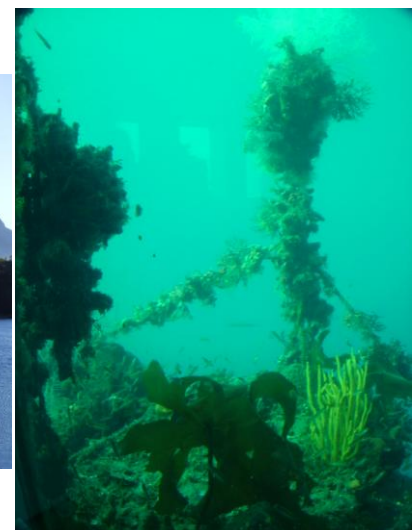
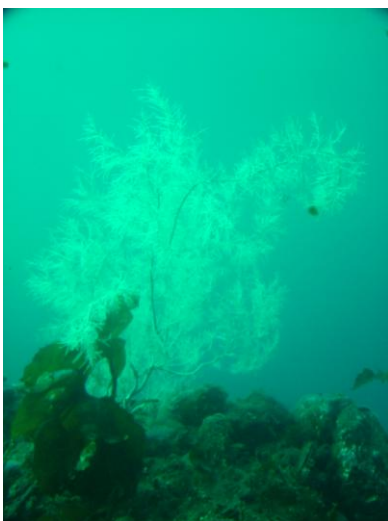
We passed waterfalls, rock faces worn smooth by constant water flows, horizontal geology features that show the forming of the sound as the glaciers wore down the mountains and the two humps where once, many millions of years ago were joined.

After we got out to the entrance to the Tasman Sea there were only ripples on the ocean but no dolphins so the boat headed back into the sound on its journey back.

Everything looks so small and insignificant compared with the mountains, the waterfalls, and the amount of water in the sound.



On the way back we passed a rocky outcrop where there were a number of male seals resting on the rocks apparently they have been banished by their fur seal colonies. As we had tickets for the discovery centre we hopped off the cruise boat while it continued back to the wharf. The discovery centre is a floating platform that has a 60 feet underwater observatory where you can see black coral and fish that are not fed but just hang around the observatory.



A smaller 30 foot boat took us back to the wharf to meet up with the other people who didn't hop off the boat, jump back into the bus and head back to Te Anau. The trip back retraced our steps and as I sat back and looked out through the viewing panels on top of the bus one can only marvel at God's creation and how nature takes its course regardless of what human scientists theorise about how the world began, the effects of global warming and how humans came into existence. People should have faith in our creator as He made everything and we need to give Him all thanks and praise.

The Chasm (we stopped here on our way back to Te Anau) has a short walking track that takes you through a tropical like forest to a stream that runs under a wooden bridge to a thundering waterfall dropping through rocks that have been worn for the thousands of years since the ice age. In the carpark there was a Kea, a native New Zealand parrot predominantly green with a huge beak known to destroy anything if given a chance.



With this on my mind I drifted in and out of sleep until we arrived back in Te Anau and time to say goodbye to Malcolm and the other passengers. This afternoon there is no wind so the temperature minus the wind chill factor made walking along the lake side pleasant. We headed up to the supermarket to buy a couple of things and as we headed back to the motorhome darkness started to set in at 5:15pm.

Although tomorrow the drive to Queenstown should only take 2 hours, we will still be heading off early in the morning. Time for a hot shower, tea and to bed.